CHAPTER 6

Information and Knowledge:
Qing China’s Perceptions of the Maritime World in the Eighteenth Century

Introduction

Eighteenth-century Qing China was “at the height of its celebrated ‘Prosperous Age’”,¹ when the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–95) extended the country’s inland borders westward and built a vast and powerful land empire. He could also have become another enlightened monarch, following the path of his contemporary European counterparts and establishing a place for his country in the emerging modern international order, particularly in the maritime world. Instead, China passed its heyday toward the end of Qianlong’s long reign and, in contrast to Europe, where a succession of maritime powers emerged after the sixteenth century, China firmly remained a continental state, even at its political and economic apogee in the eighteenth century.

Among all the factors of a complex reality, it appears that during the country’s prosperous eighteenth century, the Chinese authorities continued to focus on domestic issues and chose not to play an active role in the maritime world. C.A. Bayly observes that successful intelligence gathering was a critical feature of empire building,² but China made no systematic, institutionalized effort to collect information on the emerging European maritime powers that would soon pose threats to its maritime defenses.

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The collection and accumulation of information would involve not only the state, but also groups or individuals in society.\(^3\) As Hiram Morgan points out:

The question of information gathering was more than simply a bureaucratic and technical operation. It is in fact an intensely ideological process—not only why information is gathered, but how, by whom, under what criteria, how it is processed, represented and utilized.\(^4\)

Information collection could simply be a matter of curiosity about the outside world. More commonly, states sought to understand foreign countries in order to secure a favorable position in the international order, or for the purpose of safeguarding national security.

This chapter provides a general survey of Qing China’s perceptions and knowledge of the maritime world, and makes an attempt to understand why China abstained from competing with the European states in the quest for a place in the maritime world. The principle source for this analysis is the *Qing shilu* (Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty) of the Qianlong reign that provides a succinct and continuous record of Court activities and offers an overview of the Court perceptions, management and discussions of maritime affairs.

**Geographical Knowledge of Foreign Lands in Perspective**

Throughout their long history, the Chinese have displayed a strong interest in the world beyond their borders. China’s long tradition of geographical writings reflects intense curiosity about their own living conditions in various parts of the country and also in the non-Sinic zone on the periphery, an area that affected the country’s security and trade. The geographical texts provide extensive information about “a broad range of practical subjects, from local customs and topography to history, politics and economic conditions”.\(^5\) The Qing period inherited this long interest in foreign countries that was extended to a search for knowledge about

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3. Ib id., p. 367.
the Western world. A case in point is the work *Haiguo tuzhi* (Illustrated gazetteer of the maritime nations), compiled by Wei Yuan (1794–1856) and completed four months after the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) was signed in the aftermath of the First Opium War (1839–42). Jane Kate Leonard argues that the *Haiguo tuzhi* "played a pivotal role" in shaping Chinese foreign relations in the nineteenth century, because it "directed official-literati attention to the maritime world which the Manchus had almost totally neglected in strategic considerations prior to the Opium War; and it sparked a searching revision of Ch'ing (Qing) views about maritime relations".\(^6\) In preparing his study, Wei Yuan drew on China’s voluminous geographical literature to write about foreign lands that were of great importance to his country.

Aside from its traditional interest in the non-Sinic zone around its land borders, Imperial China also maintained relations with territories in the maritime world for more than two millennia, particularly in the “Nanhai” (South Seas) that became known as the Nanyang (Southern Ocean) from the early eighteenth century. “Nanhai” or “Nanyang” was the most commonly used geographical term for the maritime sector of present-day Southeast Asia. Well-known geographical works such as Zhao Rugua’s (1170–1231) *Zufan zhi* (Gazetteer of barbarian lands; 1225) and Wang Dayuan’s (c. 1311‒?) *Daoyi zhilue* (Brief notes on island barbarians; 1349) provided wide-ranging accounts of the maritime world. Zhao was in charge of maritime trade and shipping (*shibo*) in Quanzhou and obtained information about the customs and commodities and other aspects of the maritime countries, particularly those in the Nanhai, from merchants and sailors who frequented this port. Wang was himself a seafarer, and began his visits to the various maritime countries at the age of 20.

The earlier works had a great impact on studies compiled during the Ming era (1368–1644). Among the important geographical texts of this period were Ma Huan’s (fl. 1414–51) *Yingya shenglan* (Overall survey of the ocean’s shores) and Zhang Xie’s (1574‒1640) *Dongxi yang kao* (An investigation into the affairs of the Eastern and Western Oceans). Ma Huan took part in the Zheng He (1371‒1435) expeditions (1405–33); Zhang Xie’s work that was printed in 1617 recorded substantial information about maritime trade during the late Ming. The two texts advanced knowledge about the Nanhai and beyond. The first important geographical work during the Qing was *Haiguo wenjian lu* (Record of matters seen and heard in the maritime countries) by Chen Lunjong (c. 1683‒c. 1747), which was completed in 1730. Chen learned about

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 1.
Boundaries and Beyond

The older Chen engaged in overseas trade and traveled extensively in the maritime world. While holding an official military appointment in Guangdong, Chen Lunjióng acquired information about maritime affairs by regular meetings with merchants from foreign countries, and by studying their customs, books and maps. Moreover, since Chinese junks had been visiting Japan and Southeast Asia in growing numbers since the sixteenth century, by that time there was a substantial body of seafarers, including traders, with extensive knowledge of the region. However, despite these networks, the contributions of Chinese writers never reached a level comparable to that of their Western counterparts.

Information about Europe was especially sparse. Although China’s first contact with Europe had occurred some two thousand years earlier, later encounters were sporadic until the arrival of Portuguese adventurers early in the sixteenth century. Other Europeans soon made their presence felt in Chinese waters, and Sino-European relations were subsequently placed on a more regular footing. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Qing China had intensive contacts with the maritime world, particularly with the Nanyang, and, through European trading centers there, with Europe itself. European traders were also present at the southern Chinese port of Guangzhou. Zhang Xie describes Chinese contacts with the Spanish in Luzon and the Dutch in the Nanhai, and includes passages about the two European countries. Chen Lunjióng also provides scattered, sometimes vague pieces of information about Europe, although he shows little interest in developing knowledge of Europe or in searching for accurate and useful details.

One source that could easily have aroused curiosity about the world in general and the West in particular in China were Western-style maps drawn by the Jesuits after their arrival in the late sixteenth century. The Italian Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) produced a map entitled Kun yu wan guo quan tu (A complete map of nations) in 1602, and the Belgian missionary Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88) prepared the Kun yu quan tu (A Complete Map of the World) in 1674, but these maps were stored in the palace and few people ever saw them. Therefore, although the Jesuits


8. Zhongguo gudai ditu ji—Qing dai, p. 9. Cf. also Guo Shuanglin 郭双林, Xichao jidang xia de wan Qing dili xue 西潮激荡下的晚清地理学 Studies on geography
introduced the world to China, neither their maps nor their writings and contributions to scientific knowledge had a significant impact on the Chinese people and, by the eighteenth century, the initial enthusiasm shown by the Ming-Qing Courts had largely died away. One rare example of a Chinese map that closely resembled the Western-style world map can be found in *Haiguo wenjian lu*. It was prepared by Chen Lunjiong, a Chinese who was not part of Court circles.

A change of attitude can be seen in the generation of scholars that included Liang Tingnan (1796–1861), who was assigned to begin the compilation of the *Yue haiguan zhi* (Gazetteer of the Guangdong maritime customs) in 1838, by which time the presence and impact of the West was being palpably felt and there was a sense of an impending crisis. The work was intended to explain the maritime world. Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu (1785–1850) had consulted Liang Tingnan on matters relating to coastal defenses against threats from the West. The two men had similar ideas about maritime affairs.

**Geographical Knowledge and Perceptions of the Maritime World**

The present discussion concerns two sectors of the maritime world known to the Chinese: the Nanyang and the Da Xiyang (the Great Western Ocean). The following is a general survey of the Court discussions as recorded in the *Qing shilu* during the Qianlong era.

**The Nanyang**

An examination of the Qianlong reign in the *Qing shilu* reveals the Qing obsession with traditional perception of maritime defenses (*haifang*). Despite the cumulative knowledge available in late imperial times of the maritime world since the arrival of the Europeans, the Qing limited their attention to security within the Inner Ocean (*neiyang*) and coastal regions. The case of Taiwan is most illustrative. Almost without exception, discussions among Court officials on the governance of the island stressed
its vulnerability on account of the great divide between the island and the mainland constituted by the sea.\textsuperscript{10}

Taiwan was described as being situated in isolation across the seas (haiwai), and the official perception of the island was that it provided a refuge for "evil people and bandits" (jianfei).\textsuperscript{11} In fact, even such offshore islands as Jinmen (Quemoy), which was within sight of the mainland, caused security concerns.\textsuperscript{12} As a land power, the Manchu government was mentally more willing to expand inland toward the western frontiers than it was to explore or dominate the ocean.

The Qing authorities cautiously allowed Han Chinese seafarers to seek their livelihood along the coast and abroad, since the maritime populations on the southeast coast could barely sustain themselves through agriculture alone. Any stoppage of maritime trade would have caused hardship for the people and subsequent social tension. However, overseas trade was not seen as a potential source of wealth for the state. On the contrary, the Court cast a suspicious eye on the maritime populations and their external contacts. The lengthy debates among high officials in the early 1740s arising from a massacre of Chinese in Batavia are a case in point. The Court did not find it necessary to take action against the Dutch authorities in order to protect its overseas subjects because the Chinese in the foreign land were seen as local-born and no different from the native people of the host country. They were not deemed to be worthy of the Court’s sympathy.\textsuperscript{13} Even though China was a state with large numbers of enterprising seafaring people, the country remained self-contained and did not find it necessary to develop an active and forward-looking maritime policy.

Rhetorically, tributary relations were upheld as the normal and conventional mode of official reception of foreigners. Qing perceptions of the maritime world were based on universal harmony and foreign submission to the Heavenly Kingdom (tianchao), a notion supported by the Court’s reception of tributary missions to China. The Qing shilu

\textsuperscript{10} Qing shilu: Gaozong chao 清实录:高宗朝 [Veritable records of the Qing Dynasty: Gaozhong/Qianlong Reign] (hereafter QSL: GZ) [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985–86], 11/12 (12th month of the 11th year of the Qianlong Reign), \textit{juan} (volume) 281, p. 670. The pagination of the Zhonghua Shuju reprint is used instead of the original edition, because the reprint edition does not clearly show the original pagination in most cases.

\textsuperscript{11} QSL: GZ, 17/10, \textit{juan} 424, p. 551.

\textsuperscript{12} QSL: GZ, 44/9, \textit{juan} 1091, p. 651.

\textsuperscript{13} QSL: GZ 7/10, \textit{juan} 176, pp. 264–5.


frequently mentions the arrivals of foreign envoys, including those from such places in the Nanyang as Siam and Sulu.\(^{14}\)

The Court was well aware that the Nanyang offered economic benefits to the people in China’s littoral regions who sought their livelihood in trade-related activities, and that it had empty spaces that could relieve population pressures in the homeland. Moreover, the region was a source of highly valued commodities, among them spices, aromatics, medicinal products and rice. Siam in particular exported large quantities of rice to grain-deficit coastal China.\(^{15}\) However, the Qing state did not always perceive the Nanyang as lands of opportunity and tranquility. Even though the indigenous states in the Nanyang were non-threatening, the region caused the Qing authorities some uneasiness. In the first place, seafaring people made the authorities uncomfortable because their activities could not be kept under official surveillance. The Qing state was especially suspicious of its subjects who were employed by foreign countries as headmen,\(^{16}\) interpreters\(^{17}\) or crew members of foreign trading junks. For example, the attitude of the Qing Court toward the Dutch colonial outpost in the Indonesian Archipelago ranged from suspicion to outright hostility, as on the occasion of the Batavia incident.

In the eastern region of the Nanyang lay the Spanish Philippines, better known to the Chinese as Luzon. The Qing state saw Manila as another trouble spot because, like Batavia, it was home to a large south Fujianese settlement, and because Roman Catholic missionaries had infiltrated Fujian, especially the prefecture of Funing, where their teachings were enthusiastically received by the local population.\(^{18}\) Roman Catholicism was mentioned among the ”xiejiao” (evil beliefs).

\(^{14}\) See for example, QSL: GZ, 16/6, juan 392, p. 153; 17/9, juan 422, p. 522; 19/11, juan 476, p. 1148; 46/7, juan 1137, p. 201; 49/8 juan 1213, p. 268; 51/3, juan 1251, p. 812; 51/7, juan 1260, p. 953; 54/8, juan 1337, p. 1133; 55/0, juan 1360, p. 225; 58/1, and juan 1421, p. 19.

\(^{15}\) QSL: GZ 8/11, juan 204, p. 627.

\(^{16}\) As in the case of Chen Yilao 陈怡老, who sojourned in Batavia for more than 20 years and was appointed ”jiabitan” (Captain). The Court thought that people like Chen naturally assisted the Dutch to gather information about the conditions in China. See QSL: GZ, 14/8, juan 346, p. 785; and 16/15, juan 391, p. 138. Refer to Chapter 13 about Chen’s case.

\(^{17}\) Ma Can 马灿 (Ma Guangming 马光明) and Chen Rong 陈荣 (Chen Chaosheng 陈朝盛) were two seafarers who settled in Sulu, serving as interpreters, and even acted as the tributary envoys for Sulu on several occasions in the 1740s. The Court perceived them as trouble makers. See QSL: GZ 12/1, juan 282, p. 682.

\(^{18}\) QSL: GZ 11/5, juan 267, p. 472; 11/6, juan 269, p. 502; and 11/8, juan 273, p. 575.
that the authorities were determined to keep in check.\textsuperscript{19} The Qing Court realized that Roman Catholicism was widespread in Luzon and the place accordingly attracted Chinese converts.\textsuperscript{20} The Court also suspected that its own subjects were assisting the spread of the foreign religion and helping the missionaries from Luzon in gathering intelligence to facilitate the missionary activities in Fujian.\textsuperscript{21}

The upshot was a strong sense of insecurity on the part of the Court. Its nervousness about the Nanyang was enhanced in early 1740 by the Batavia incident. It realized that, although war junks were deployed in the provinces along the coast like Shandong, Jiangnan, Zhejiang, Guangdong and Guangxi, effective control had been adversely affected by the long peace (\textit{chengping rijiu}) and, as a result, “the readiness among the officers and the rank and file had become lax”.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{The Da Xiyang}

Chen Lunjong’s work \textit{Haiguo wenj\textsc{\textit{ian}} lu} included such European countries as Portugal, Spain, England (\textit{Ying Ji Li}), Holland, France and Russia under the geographical term “Da Xiyang”.\textsuperscript{23} On the basis of the concept of universal harmony and voluntary submission to the Heavenly Kingdom, imperial rhetoric did not differentiate the countries in the Da Xiyang from those in the Nanyang. The \textit{Qing shil\textsc{\textit{u}}}’s entry for 1752, for example, recorded the arrival of a Portuguese “tributary mission” in Guangzhou, from where it was escorted to the imperial capital.\textsuperscript{24} And, in 1794, the Court warmly welcomed the arrival of the Dutch “tributary envoy” (\textit{gongshi}).

At times the Da Xiyang was even considered a source of foreign talent, supplying people who could serve or work in the imperial capital. Medical practitioners, astronomers, artists and watchmakers were among the skilled people sought by the Court.\textsuperscript{25} Although it banned missionary activities in the country, the imperial government often reiterated its approval of such services as the above categories.\textsuperscript{26} European people (\textit{Xiyang ren}, or Western Ocean people) could submit applications to serve

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} QSL: GZ 11/9, juan 275, p. 583.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} QSL: GZ 13/5, juan 315, p. 169.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} QSL: GZ 13/3, juan 310, p. 69; and 13/5, juan 315, p. 169.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} QSL: GZ 5/8, juan 125, 831.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Chen Lunjong 陳倫炯, \textit{Haiguo wenj\textsc{\textit{ian}} lu} \textit{海國聞見錄} [Record of matters seen and heard from the maritime countries] (1793 ed.; orig. 1730), 1: 31a–35a.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} QSL: GZ, 17/9, juan 422, p. 522.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} QSL: GZ, 31/9, juan 768, pp. 427–8.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} QSL: GZ, 49/8, juan 1213, pp. 267–8.
\end{itemize}
the Court through the local authorities, who would in turn send them to the imperial capital. The Court instructed the high-ranking provincial officials to treat these requests in a positive manner and not to turn them down.\textsuperscript{27} Two such applications arrived in 1783, and four more in the following year. At that point, the Court instructed that the recruitment of foreign talent should stop for the time being until a shortage of people with technical skills might arise in the future.\textsuperscript{28}

Notwithstanding this appreciation of foreign skills, there were incidents that indicated a deep distrust of and at times hostility toward the Europeans. First was the Court’s hostile attitude toward the missionary presence in the country. Strict restrictions were imposed on their activities, and the Court was never slow to prosecute them; many were arrested or severely punished.\textsuperscript{29} Second was the government’s sense of insecurity about the European presence. The authorities were particularly nervous about the arrival of the Europeans in places other than the designated port of Guangzhou. It was reported in 1756 that in recent years ships from European countries (\textit{hongmao deng guo}) had frequented Dinghai in Zhejiang. It was feared that allowing the continuity of such visits would transform Dinghai into another Macao, something that would have undesirable effects on local people and threaten the security of the maritime provinces.\textsuperscript{30} A third issue was the large quantities of silk shipped out of China by the western vessels, considered to be the cause of the high price of silk on local markets and a threat to the local economy. To stabilize prices and meet local demand, the Qing Court placed an embargo on silk exports.\textsuperscript{31} A fourth matter was Lord Macartney’s (1737‒1806) embassy to China in 1793.\textsuperscript{32} His entourage

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\item 27. QSL: GZ, 43/9, juan 1066, p. 259; 49/8, juan 1213, p. 267; and 43/11, juan 1218, p. 339.
\item 28. QSL: GZ, 49/11, juan 1219, p. 359.
\item 29. QSL: GZ. See for example, 49/10, juan 1216, pp. 317–8; 49/11, juan 1218, pp. 339–44; and 49/11, juan 1219, pp. 346–8.
\item 30. QSL: GZ, 22/2, juan 533, pp. 720–1; 22/10, juan 549, p. 1010, 24/8, juan 594, pp. 620–1; 24/9, juan 597, pp. 650–3; and 24/10, juan 598, pp. 677–8.
\item 31. QSL: GZ, 24/9, juan 596, pp. 539–40; 24/12, juan 603, p. 771; 27/5, juan 660, p. 391; 29/2, juan 704, p. 867; 29/3, juan 707, p. 895; and 29/4, juan 708, p. 909.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
consisted of more than 50 officers and 800 crew members on board five ships. The Court received a letter from a British subject conveying his king’s regret about the country’s absence from the celebration of the Qianlong Emperor’s 80th birthday two years previously, and saying that the king was sending a “tribute” mission led by Lord Macartney. The mission would travel to Tianjin by sea and proceed from there to the imperial capital. The Court was satisfied with the respectful (*gongshun*) language of the letter in the Chinese translation, and gave its permission, even though coastal-defense officials had misgivings about allowing the mission to sail along the coast up to Tianjin, which was considered the front gate to the national capital. Disarmed by the flattering Chinese-language letter, the Court allowed the British vessels to sail north along the coast.

Imperial China had had opportunities to accumulate greater knowledge about countries in the *Da Xiyang* since the sixteenth century. By the time of Lord Macartney’s arrival, Qing China was aware of the fact that, of all “the Xiyang nations” (*Xiyang geguo*), Great Britain was a particularly strong naval power and might become a military threat. The Court was well informed about Britain’s prowess and aggressiveness in the maritime world. And yet the Qianlong Emperor was indecisive in dealing with the British mission. On the one hand, provincial authorities were told to keep a watchful eye on the movements of the British envoy and his suite and, if necessary, to restrict their movements. On the other hand, in response to persistent requests by the British envoy, on his return trip the Emperor allowed him to travel by inland waterways to Jiangxi and from there to cross the mountain range to Guangdong. This provided a rare opportunity for the British to gather valuable intelligence about conditions in the interior.

**Scholarship on China in Perspective**

The subject of Qing China’s perceptions of the foreign lands beyond its borders and particularly of the maritime world has been well researched

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1466, p. 579; 59/12, *juan* 1467, pp. 591–2, 595–6; and 60/12, *juan* 1493, pp. 980–1.
over the past few decades. This section provides a sketch of the main historiographical trends.

“Sinocentrism” is a convenient point of departure. Explaining Qing China’s perceptions of non-Chinese states, the concept of “Sinocentrism” had often been used to characterize a “Chinese world order”, within which China’s foreign relations were “hierarchic and nonegalitarian”.37 According to this understanding, China was indolent and ignorant of the outside world, waiting to be awakened to reality by the West as happened during the Opium War. Tributary rituals governed the relationship between the Son of Heaven and all other rulers, and defined Chinese attitudes to and practices in foreign relations.38

The Chinese imperial government, in the words of John E. Wills, Jr., “showed an astonishing lack of curiosity”39 about non-Chinese countries, and few Qing officials even attempted to collect commercial information systematically. Wills states that the general lack of systematic empirical curiosity resulted from “the Sino-centric idea that foreigners weren’t worth that much attention”.40 Writings adopting this point of view have noted that the Qing Court believed in economic self-sufficiency, with agriculture at the core of the national economy and commerce and the handicraft industry as secondary endeavors. One often quoted statement used to illustrate this perception is the condescending edict of the Qianlong Emperor to King George III of Great Britain in 1793 following the Macartney embassy. It reads:

The Celestial Court has pacified and possessed the territory within four seas. Its sole aim is to do its utmost to achieve good government and to manage political affairs, attaching no value to strange jewels and precious objects... As a matter of fact... there is nothing we lack, ... nor do we need any more of your country’s manufactures.41

More rigorous thinking found in recent scholarship has moved discussions of Chinese history beyond such cultural explanations.

40. Ibid.
The concept of Sinocentrism, that supposedly manifested the Chinese world view as expressed in the tributary relations and China’s sense of superiority, has been subjected to increasing scrutiny. Writing 20 years after his earlier essay, that was contributed to John King Fairbank’s volume, John E. Wills, Jr modifies his strong view and suggests that the concept of Sinocentrism is “the wrong place to begin” a study of Qing social and economic history or of China’s foreign relations.42 Several scholars have proposed alternative interpretations that go beyond European models to explain the dynamics of change.43 From the perspective of political economy, Bin Wong, for example, has said that “what governments think is important”, and that the Chinese imperial governments defined “their challenges and capacities” within “a world of limited possibilities”. Security in relation to China’s contacts with border peoples and the maintenance of social order remained the principal concerns of the state.44

Concluding Remarks

Imperial China’s knowledge of the maritime world was developed through contacts that extended over many centuries. Information was passed down orally and later compiled in geographical and historical texts prepared by minor local officials, scholars or seafarers.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the broad maritime space was more clearly divided into several geographical sectors. Two of these were the Nanyang and the Da Xiyang, discussed in this chapter.

Although the Nanyang was the maritime sector closest to China, it was perceived as less threatening, despite increasing complications following the establishment of Dutch and Spanish colonial outposts in the region. The growing power of the British and the Dutch created a less friendly image of the Da Xiyang countries, and Qing China became increasingly uneasy about them, but they were seen more as a nuisance than as an

active threat, partly because of the illusion that distance precluded an imminent danger to China. The lack of a sense of crisis rather than cultural superiority explains the apathy of Qing China regarding the advances of Western civilization, an attitude reflected in the work of the Chinese compilers of geographical and historical texts.

The rhetoric associated with tributary states continued during the prosperous Qianlong Reign, despite expanded contacts with the West in the port of Guangzhou. There was no sense of impending danger, and China displayed no interest in moving beyond its tributary perspective in external relations. Qing concerns remained focused on internal security and social order, and China expended considerable efforts on tightening security and centralizing imperial control. The country displayed a contradictory mix of confidence and insecurity. Perceived threats from within and without were dealt with through coercive administrative or penal measures, and a similar approach prevailed in foreign relations. As John King Fairbank has written:

> China’s external order was so closely related to her internal order that one could not long survive without the other; when the barbarians were not submissive abroad, rebels might more easily arise within... Every regime was therefore under pressure to make the facts of its foreign relations fit the theory and so confirm its claim to rule China.46

In other words, no institutionalized efforts were made to tackle perceived external threats at their source through, say, the collection of intelligence.

It is true that the perceptions of the maritime world of the Qing state and its people differed greatly from each other. For the former, maritime space denoted uncertainty and danger, but coastal populations viewed the sea as a highway to promising lands and prosperity. Society at large lacked access to information held by the state, and had no institutional support for obtaining precise and accurate information about foreign countries. Information about foreign nations was often superficial or faulty and based on outdated geographical texts.47

46. Ibid., p. 3.
47. The work by Chen Lunjiong is one example. Even the curious Liang Tingnan 梁廷枬 (1796–1861), in his work *Yuehai guan zhi* 粵海關志 [Gazetteer of the Guangdong maritime customs], was not able to obtain much first-hand information about recent developments of the Western powers that had become threatening forces.
With reference to information and empire building, C.A. Bayly observes that British knowledge of India and its people “arose as much from natural inquisitiveness and the desire to comprehend the world as it was, as from a simple aim of domination”.\footnote{C.A. Bayly, \textit{Empire and Information}, p. 371.} In contrast, intelligence gathering and knowledge generating had not been part of Qing China’s political culture in the face of a rapidly changing maritime world. It is far-fetched to say that eighteenth-century Qing China was not curious about the outside world, or rejected outright all things foreign. However, what attracted the Emperor, officials and rich families were “curios” rather than steam machines. Consequently, there was no sense of urgency and no desire to go beyond existing rudimentary ideas about the maritime world until the crisis of the Opium War shook the country and changed the nature of curiosity among the Chinese. In the meantime, Qing China was content to follow the tributary formula, and to maintain amicable trade relations with the outside world in Guangzhou.\footnote{One recent work on the topic can be found in Paul A. Van Dyke, \textit{The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).}